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Honorable Members of the Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony about Raised H.B. 6620, *An Act Concerning the Right to Read and Addressing Opportunity Gaps and Equity in Public Education*.

My name is Ivelise Velazquez, and I am a Puerto Rican educator with 27 years of experience as an elementary teacher, reading teacher, Director of Reading, and district leader. I also lead racial equity professional learning sessions and believe that racial equity and literacy go hand in hand, because of my own experiences as a struggling reader and as an educator working primarily with students of color. I am here, representing my views as a district leader in New Haven, to express my concerns about 6620 as proposed.

I recognize that the overarching intent of the bill is to ensure students learn to read and to uplift the efforts by parents and educators who believe that schools have an obligation to provide the very best literacy instruction possible. I agree and believe strongly that we must prepare every student to read increasingly complex text, regardless of where they live, their race, native language or income level.

Although I agree with the intent behind this bill, I believe it will miss the mark as it is currently written. In its current form, this bill furthers a color-blind approach that does not acknowledge that student's lived experiences, interests, and local context combined with excellent differentiated instruction are the factors that contribute to successful reading. **I have offered several specific changes to the bill at the end of my testimony.**

If your goal is to achieve greater equity and close opportunity gaps, I ask that the Connecticut General Assembly double-down on how it funds and directs the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) to support each district and their teachers to shore up systems for instruction using culturally relevant pedagogy.

I am concerned that this bill refers to “the Science of Reading” and would authorize curriculum and instruction approval rights for the Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success.

Who are the researchers and private entities behind the Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success? If this Center will have approval rights for the curriculum and methods of instruction that we use in each district, shouldn’t we know who they are, what racial and cultural assets and beliefs they draw from, and shouldn’t we know precisely what they mean by “the Science of Reading?”

The “Science of Reading” often represents a narrow approach that emphasizes phonemic awareness and phonics over the broader areas of reading that represent all the things that students must be able to do to read and understand rich text, especially Multilingual Learners and students of non-dominant cultures who have been underserved in educational settings. The following chart from the University of Michigan shows 23 items that make up the most important “knowledge, skills, and dispositions” that teachers must develop for students to be successful readers, including, but not only, on the state standardized test.

As listed on the chart, phonology, decoding and word reading make up only 3 out of 23 items (University of Michigan, 2020). This is because reading is complex and because there is no research to show that teachers should narrowly focus on those concepts over the other items on

the list. Phonology should be part of the mix, just not the thing that excludes all other areas of reading.

Duke, N. K. (2019). Reading by third grade: How policymakers can foster early literacy. *The State Education Standard*, 19(2), 6-11.

**Box 1.**

The range of knowledge, skills, and dispositions entailed in state reading tests presents a formidable task for classroom teachers. Among other things, teachers need to develop children's

■ print awareness/concepts of print	■ syntactic awareness
■ phonological awareness	■ text structure analysis
■ decoding and word recognition	■ executive skills (e.g., inhibitory control)
■ word-reading strategies	■ genre knowledge
■ comprehension monitoring	■ comprehension strategies
■ reading fluency	■ literal comprehension
■ vocabulary knowledge	■ inferential comprehension
■ vocabulary strategies	■ critical comprehension
■ morphological analysis	■ scanning and skimming
■ science and social studies knowledge	■ text navigation and search
■ graphophonological semantic	■ reading stamina
■ cognitive flexibility	■ facilitative reading attitudes

[https://nasbe.nyc3.digitaloceanspaces.com/2019/05/Duke\\_May-2019-Standard.pdf](https://nasbe.nyc3.digitaloceanspaces.com/2019/05/Duke_May-2019-Standard.pdf)

I believe we can prepare teachers to properly diagnose and instruct students on their unique needs, needs that will vary across those 23 items...I know this because I have been part of teacher teams and school and district teams that have done this well. What we need now isn't an entity to prescribe what happens at the district level, but rather a commitment to training and materials to ensure that all teachers have the same supports that I had as a successful teacher and reading interventionist. The same supports that allowed my 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher to insist that I prepare to read aloud the part of Anne Frank in class despite my apprehension. As a result, it became the first time I ever read anything from cover to cover. This was my experience, because the watered down literacy instruction I was exposed to prior to that moment over generalized my problem as a phonics issue. Had I been given books earlier, someone had tapped into what interested me, what was profoundly moving, I may have read earlier...when I became a teacher of reading, I knew that knowing how to diagnose skill deficits alone would never be enough to ensure my students would love to read and would continue to read. I'm concerned that the

proponents of this bill have a view of reading that is too narrow, and if enacted, the State will continue to disproportionately involve districts serving a majority of students of color in a heavily skill-based, over-tested, low-expectation cycles of instruction.

Students struggle with literacy for many reasons, so why would we adopt a one-size fits all approach? We must prepare teachers to be flexible, while remaining vigilant regarding data, decision-making and collaborating with colleagues to design lessons that address exactly what students need rather than go down a narrow path. Nell Duke, professor and literacy researcher from University of Michigan points to data from North Carolina's state reading test, where 31-39% of readers who failed to meet proficiency demonstrate no issues with word reading or fluency, as evidence by their scores on nonsense words, phoneme segmentation, or oral fluency tests (University of Michigan, 2020). To simply organize teachers to teach more phonics, is not going to produce more readers with deep comprehension in North Carolina, Connecticut or anywhere. The work that needs to be done has to happen district by district and school by school focused on the unique assets and interests of each student. That's what students deserve and that's how we can organize at the local level to provide the very best instruction, so let's not start with a Center that will prescribe what must happen from a centralized location.

Rather than narrowing the emphasis to phonology, I recommend that the Connecticut General Assembly consider how three areas of research work together to help districts and teachers be successful. The following slide is from a talk entitled *Bringing the Actual Science of Reading to Policy and Practice* convened by University of Michigan (2020). The experts reminded us that the actual science of reading involves research on **the reading process**, the **science of reading instruction**, and **implementation science** that takes into account issues of equity, fidelity and adaptivity, the environment and interaction effects, all of which take place in

the schools and classrooms where teachers do the work and students learn to read. In this bill, the decision-making power is misplaced at the state level in the hands of a Center whose members are yet to be announced though some private entities are poised to have a great deal of influence about who those members might be and what may be allowable.

## The Actual Science of Reading



*Source: Bringing the Actual Science of Reading to Policy and Practice, November 2020*

Further, we must insist that leaders guiding the work of districts and teachers in Connecticut are reading the research to inform the discussion, rather than listening to a few whose interpretation might not take into account all that is important, including research on reading process, instruction and implementation, as depicted above (University of Michigan, 2020). I have been listening to webinars and reading articles in which non-educators and non-researchers are using the phrase “research-based” though I doubt that they have done more than repeat the words of a small group. For instance, the researchers and policy-makers that have been on Facebook in support of this bill have referenced research studies for the CK3LI, which was the State’s pilot and the basis for the ideas proposed in the bill. To date, I have not found the studies that are touted as evidence that the students in the 70 schools that joined the project are better off than they were prior. Instead, there is data reported for 4 or 5 schools for the first and second year of implementation only, and so we must ask what has been the results in the other 65

schools, especially since the bill is asking districts to depend on this new state-level entity to approve what districts can or cannot do moving forward...where are the peer-reviewed research studies to inform policy makers and the Center, what will be the criteria they use to make decisions, what type of reading instruction will they approve and what will they ban (Coyne, et al., 2018)? Will this be similar to what is happening in Arkansas where “balanced literacy” is taboo and banned by the state without thorough review of the research?

Nell Duke suggests that guidance on reading research come from experts that read across these types of publications and that partner with districts and schools, rather than dictate to them what is banned or needs to happen based on their narrow view of the research. I am concerned that rather than support districts to get to the root of the issues, the new Center will seek to take away decision-making at the local level and hold funding for much need professional learning hostage if it goes against its narrow view of what is keeping so many from learning to read.

## Broad and Deep Expertise in Science



*Source: Bringing the Actual Science of Reading to Policy and Practice, November 2020*

Finally, I would like to emphasize that any efforts to ensure more students are reading must take into account the way the schools and teachers orient to the students that they serve. We must make every effort to diversify the workforce and encourage more researchers of color, who understand the complexities of becoming literate in a White dominated system, to join the conversation in Connecticut. We know that there are disparities in reading scores, but that pattern exists across most outcome measures – we must ask what are the bigger levers that CSDE can focus on to truly improve schooling in all areas of instruction and for students of all backgrounds. As an alternative, the CSDE might work with every district to create a racial equity plan and to build teachers' capacity of culturally relevant practices not as an aside but as a main driver for change (Ladson-Billings, 1995). By doing so, the CSDE would be impacting all areas of learning and would have a better chance of impacting outcomes rather than establishing a Center to prescribe what educators can do in one specific area of learning.

In conclusion, the bill does little to address the systemic inequities that underpin the opportunity gaps reflected in outcomes and that are persistent along the preK-12 pipeline for students traditionally marginalized, including students of color, students learning English, or students living in poverty. Rather than this top down approach, I urge the Education Committee to ask the CSDE to partner with districts to develop solutions that are based on each community's context, school by school and classroom by classroom. District leaders like myself, welcome true partnership, in which the CSDE's expertise and local expertise can work together. I ask that they set aside the one-size fits all, color-blind approach and learn to listen more closely to the systemic inequities that are standing in the way, including ill-conceived technical fixes to adaptive challenges, including funding inequities that perpetuate racist

outcomes and ensures districts are under-resourced to address trauma, homelessness, food-insecurity, core instruction and the innovations that will fully engage all students.

I offer these specific changes to the language of the bill:

- First, include an accurate definition of opportunity gap on page 3. The manner in which the bill has been altered, striking the words “achievement gap” and replace them with “opportunity gap” reveals a shallow understanding of what the term means. The gap in “opportunity gap” refers to the gaps within the institution and not the gap among the groups who have been unfairly compared, groups that are privileged and groups that are marginalized.
- Second, on page 5, strike the word “approved” in the language that calls for the Center to compile a list of “approved” reading assessments (line 1350) and replace it with “recommended” so that districts can decide which assessments suit us best, especially given the dual language programs and instruction in multiple languages that each district implements.
- Third, strike the section (lines 140 & 141) which implies that the Center will have the ability to approve progress monitoring tools and formative assessments for “frequent screening and progress monitoring of students.” To continue to be highly impactful, these must be selected by teachers collaborating at each school and not state mandated.
- Fourth, specify in lines 153 and lines 154 that the assessments are the universal screening tools and not progress monitoring or formative assessments.
- Fifth, starting on line 161 alter the definition of “Opportunity Gap” to reflect the historic inequities, systemic racism and other forces of oppression that maintain the gaps in

opportunities and keep students from achieving at the highest levels. The definition that is stated is not what is used in the literature of systemic inequities in education.

- Sixth, starting on line 168, cite an example of a program based on “reliable, valid evidence” such as Reading Recovery that is still listed on What Works Clearinghouse as among the most effective reading intervention ever evaluated. Without this example, this language is too subjective and subject to interpretation by whomever happens to be making decisions at the Center.
- Seventh, starting on 186, where it refers to “such intensive reading instruction shall include routine reading instruction” add “selected by the districts.” The CSDE already approves the universal screen that is administered three times a year. Teachers in consultation with coaches and district personnel must make the decision about what “routine assessments” will be administered for those assessments to hold the most meaning and for them to be used effectively.
- Eighth, in lines 208/209 and 214/215 the intensive reading instruction program and intensive reading intervention should be decided by the school and district personnel rather than the CSDE in consultation with the reading research information that is provided by the Center.
- Ninth, strike all references in which the districts’ reading program and reading intervention program will be decided by the CSDE and/or the new Center. The role of the CSDE and the Center should be to provide research and resources rather than make the decisions that can be and are best made locally. There is no research to show that this practice has worked in the past such as in the Reading First program in which every participating school had to purchase and implement a program approved by the State’s Reading First Management Team.

- Tenth, add a section that directs the CSDE to study the inequities that continue to be reinforced by the Scientifically Research Based Interventions (2008) model and the multi-tiered systems of supports that were a goal of the model since it rolled out in 2008. Before we establish a center to help implement the model further, educational leaders in the state might study what has occurred to date and publish a peer-reviewed study involving more than 4 schools. School and district leaders are well aware of the level of organization that needs to take place in order to implement changes that will improve student learning, in reading and in all areas. We do “realize” what is necessary to organize systems for better instruction and appreciate when CSDE partners with us on those systems, but prescribing reading programs goes well beyond that level of technical assistance (Leonard, Coyne, Oldham, Burns, & Gillis, 2019). Instead, we need the CSDE to study areas that are beyond our control, such as better teacher preparation, recruitment of experienced educators to the state and better credentialing mechanisms.

## References

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